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The Great Debate: Charles W. Eliot and M. Carey Thomas

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Sometimes, as when two students are pitted against each other as debaters in a tournament, we can delight in the play of words alone. But words usually matter because they are words that flow into actions. In the case of the words of educational leaders, they shape and reflect college policy. They set the terms in which opportunity is offered or denied to a group. They mold curriculum and thus the building blocks of educated intelligence. Thus it was in 1899 when the president of Harvard University and the president of Bryn Mawr College squared off on the subject of the education of women. Their words in 1899 mattered a great deal. An exploration of M. Carey Thomas's response to Charles William Eliot in 1899 allows us to see the alternative to Harvard's non-recognition of women within the university not from our hindsight one hundred years later, but rather from her and Bryn Mawr College's perspective at the time.

For three decades Charles William Eliot had been a great and good president of Harvard. His innovations had moved a fine provincial college into the first rank of world universities. He had nurtured creative scholarship and attracted much of the best talent to teach, engage in research, and write in his institution. He had encouraged great professional schools and their innovative practices such as the case method in law. He had introduced the full elective system for undergraduates, opening up the curriculum to new lines of inquiry and theory. He had broadened the student body to a much wider mix

of male undergraduates, including many sons of immigrants and non-Christians. He had even allowed a scheme in 1878 that opened instruction by Harvard faculty to women students through “The Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women,” familiarly called the Annex.¹

About Harvard, the mission of the modern university, the elective system, and more open admissions, Eliot spoke eloquently. When he turned to the education of women, however, his words, both in private and in public, expressed his class and gender prejudices.

His reservations about coeducation came out in a private conversation in Baltimore to the wife of a founding Johns Hopkins trustee. She wrote to her daughter, “Eliot says . . . that coeducation does very well in communities where persons are more on an equality, but in a large city where persons of all classes are thrown together it works badly, unpleasant associations are formed, and disastrous marriages are often the result.”²

In 1879, at the time of the Annex’s founding, Eliot considered college education for women and coeducation at the first Smith commencement. He stated that, although he believed that young women should receive the best education that they can physically and mentally stand, he regarded college education for them as an experiment. He feared for their health, and applauded the steps taken at Smith to secure it. Echoing his Baltimore conversation, Eliot stated that separate education insured that parents could influence the marriages of their children “by taking care of the antecedent associations of their sons or daughters,” a course best secured in single-sex institutions. But there

remained the concern that women's colleges could address: whether or not time away from home spent "in the enjoyment of keen intellectual sympathy will produce in women discontent with the domestic life which is their ordinary lot."

When he turned to reflect on coeducation, he applauded the unfounded assertion that coeducation "finds no acceptance in New England, with the most insignificant exceptions." (This at a time when Boston University had been established as coeducational under Methodist auspices.) Coming closer to his concerns, he reminded his audience that "Harvard and Yale never undertook to make social experiments, or to solve new problems relating to sex; they never had to face the grave difficulties which attend all attempts to teach together sets of persons who, like young men and young women, differ widely in regard to sensibility, quickness, docility and conscientiousness." That young women were entering the Annex and thus Harvard's doorstep was dismissed in this fashion: few New England women chose to come to colleges for men open to them "unless by exception as day-scholars living at their own homes."³

What is interesting in Eliot's address of 1879 is his desire to protect Harvard for men and his concern with the social life of students and cross-class marriages. His outlook mirrored some of the concerns at Harvard at the time. Harvard saw its mission in the late nineteenth century to be a nursery of leadership and scholarship. In the minds of the men who composed the board of trustees, women had no place in either realm. Women should receive higher learning in order to foster their domestic roles or their work as teachers, but they should not do so at the sacred grove reserved for the future ruling elite and intelligentsia. Precious resources designated for men should not be

dissipated. Nor should the sexes be mixed in classrooms during the college years, especially in nondenominational institutions like Harvard, where the opening up of admissions meant that one could not assure the social pedigree of members of the student body.⁴

In 1885 Bryn Mawr College opened its doors. Its founding trustees, many of whom had served at Johns Hopkins University, were orthodox Quaker men who supported Eliot's belief in the value of separate collegiate institutions for men and women for many of his reasons. In the case of Bryn Mawr College, they had been asked to administer the bequest for a Quaker college for women placed in a suburb outside Philadelphia. They did so in a physical setting as much like Smith College as possible. They agreed in 1884, however, to allow a Quaker daughter to serve as dean and thereby to shape the intellectual terms of the institution: the graduate school, the graduate and undergraduate curriculum, and the composition of the faculty. She was an extraordinary young woman: M. Carey Thomas, the daughter, niece, and cousin of members of the board, had graduated from Cornell and had earned her Ph.D. in philology in 1883 from the University of Zurich, the first woman ever to do so *summa cum laude*.⁵

As she planned Bryn Mawr, she took a tour of selected institutions of higher education: Smith, Wellesley, Vassar, and the Annex. In Cambridge she admired Harvard for offering students the "higher learning" from professors immersed in original work. One of them, Professor William Byerly, a great friend of the Annex, had been her mathematics professor at Cornell. She therefore believed that the Annex provided Bryn Mawr with the best precedent. Yet in 1884 it could not be a full model, for it did not

offer “the attractions of college life,” that mix of residential life and extracurricular activity and positive ethos that she had found so engaging at Wellesley and Vassar.⁶ In the next decade, as Thomas built the institutional fabric of Bryn Mawr, she tracked the Annex closely as she received reports from interested women.

Under Dean Agnes Irwin, Radcliffe began to take a series of important steps to build the extracurricular and residential life on the quadrangle on Brattle and James Streets and the residential campus on Garden Street. In so doing Radcliffe simultaneously opened access to students beyond the local area and created the material ground for college life. While much of Radcliffe’s promise was to be realized only in the first decade of the twentieth century, by 1899 plans were underway.⁷ The Radcliffe College that was emerging seriously challenged Bryn Mawr’s vaunted position as the most intellectually vital of the women’s colleges.

In 1899 both Eliot and Thomas attended the inauguration of Caroline Hazard as president of Wellesley College. Thomas spoke at the luncheon in Hazard’s honor and Eliot gave the inaugural address. By 1899 Eliot had a secure reputation as the most highly respected educational leader in the nation. Not only had he transformed Harvard; he also had worked tirelessly to reform American high schools so that they could properly prepare young people for college. At the time of his Wellesley speech Eliot was presiding over a Harvard University that had made room for Radcliffe College and accepted its plans for expansion and development. He was just about to appoint Le Baron Russell Briggs, Harvard’s dean of the faculty, to be Radcliffe’s president, a man who would greatly assist Radcliffe as it became visible and respectable in the university.

Oddly, then, Eliot used the Wellesley inauguration to voice his doubts about offering the liberal arts to women.

Eliot began by stating that, as the president of a long-established men's college, he ought to be "diffident" about giving advice to a "young college for women." Somehow he turned this humble statement into a pronounced judgment: in contrast to a man's college,

A woman's college can have no such guidance from venerable experience, and no such clear sight of the goal to which its efforts should be directed.

The so-called learned professions are very imperfectly open to women, and the scientific professions are even less accessible; and society, as a whole, has not made up its mind in what intellectual fields women may be safely and profitably employed on a large scale.

Although a man's college is clearly indispensable to society, he continued, those for women are still regarded as "luxuries or superfluities which some rather peculiar well-to-do girls desire to avail themselves of" or as a means of helping a "few exceptional girls" earn a living. The higher education of women, as a result, is not seen either by parents or by the larger public as the "solid investment" that they accord that of men.

Faced with irrelevance, what should women's colleges do? Eliot went on to instruct. Women's colleges should become schools of manners, especially necessary because women must rely on their "delicate qualities" rather than on their strength. Eliot raised the possibility that, if they succeeded, women's institutions could lead the way in teaching men's colleges how to foster the proper behavior of young people. Women's

colleges should encourage religion, especially that favored by Congregational worship, avoiding the “gregarious religious excitement so unwholesome for young women.”

Most important, according to Eliot, women’s colleges should cease to imitate colleges for men. They should stop all competitive enticements to learning such as “grades, frequent examinations, prizes, and competitive scholarships,” since women work hard without such goads. Eliot then stuck the knife home. Women’s colleges should concentrate on an education that will not injure women’s “bodily powers and functions.” Eliot continued,

It remains to demonstrate what are the most appropriate, pleasing, and profitable studies for women, both from the point of view of the individual and the point of view of society; and this demonstration must be entirely freed from the influence of comparisons with the intellectual capacities and tastes of men. It would be a wonder, indeed, if the intellectual capacities of women were not at least as unlike those of men as their bodily capacities are.⁸

Sitting in her academic robes as part of the ceremonial delegation, Carey Thomas listened to Eliot’s speech with mounting fury. She wrote to her intimate friend Mary Garrett after the ceremony, “Eliot disgraced himself. He said the traditions of past learning and scholarship were of no use to women’s education, that women’s words were as unlike men’s as their bodies, that women’s colleges ought to be schools of manners and really was hateful.” In a subsequent letter she recalled Eliot’s Wellesley speech as “so brutal, it made me hot from head to foot.”⁹

In 1899, at age 42, Thomas had been president of Bryn Mawr College for five years. She had spent her life trying to demonstrate that women's capacity of mind was equal to that of men and that women had a right to a man's education.

To M. Carey Thomas, Eliot was no abstract being on a podium, but a person who once stood as an obstacle in her course. The wife of the Johns Hopkins' trustee who had written to her daughter with Eliot's objections to coeducation was Mary Whitall Thomas; the daughter was her 17-year-old Martha Carey Thomas. Eliot was one of the critical voices that insured that Johns Hopkins opened only to male undergraduates, making it necessary for the daughter to go elsewhere for college.

As she returned to Bryn Mawr after the Wellesley ceremonies, M. Carey Thomas offered her reply in the chapel talk that opened the college year. Thomas began by accepting Eliot's statement that it was the mission of a college to teach manners. In the "mutual association" of new and returning students in the residence halls, she hoped there would "be fashioned and perfected the type of Bryn Mawr women which will, we hope, become as well known and universally admired a type as the Oxford and Cambridge man." In the halls younger students would be influenced by "the scholarly point of view of the older students," and they would learn good manners. Bryn Mawr was to become a school of "good breeding. . . . Manners do, as President Eliot says, matter immensely and if the Bryn Mawr woman should add to scholarship and character gentle breeding and could join high standards of behavior and usages of culture and gentle observances to high standards of scholarship we should have the type we are seeking to create."

Having established this, she went on to her central point. She attacked Eliot's premise that the world of knowledge "existing from the time of the Egyptians to the present existed only for men," and that therefore the curriculum and methods of men's colleges were no guide for women. This was, Thomas retorted, nonsense. "He might as well have told the president of Wellesley to invent a new Christian religion for Wellesley or new symphonies and operas, a new Beethoven and Wagner, new statues and pictures, a new Phidias and a new Titian, new tennis, new golf. . . . in short, a new intellectual heavens and earth."¹⁰

Thomas firmly believed that women should take no separate courses, such as psychology or domestic science, to prepare them for life's tasks, nor should existing subjects be presented from a women's point of view. Women's education must be identical to that of men. The life of the mind has no gender. As she later put it, "Science and literature and philology are what they are and inalterable." Although science and culture belong to women, they have been robbed of opportunity. "The life of the intellect and spirit has been lived only by men. The world of scholarship and research has been a man's world." Her task was to change that. Women's colleges have a special mission. They uphold the highest standards. They offer a place where the woman student can be the focus. They give employment to women scholars and researchers.

As women enter professions, the education they receive must be the same as men's:

Given two bridge-buildings, a man and a woman, given a certain bridge to be built, and given as always the unchangeable laws of mechanics . . . it is

simply inconceivable that the preliminary instruction given to the two bridge-builders should differ in quantity, quality, or method of presentation because while the bridge is building one will wear knickerbockers and the other a rainy-day skirt.

Driving home her point, she argued for identical medical education for men and women: “There is no reason to believe that typhoid or scarlet fever or phthisis can be successfully treated by a woman physician in one way and by a man physician in another way. There is indeed every reason to believe that unless treated in the best way, the patient may die, the sex of the doctor affecting the result even less than the sex of the patient.” The career paths of women and men must be identical. Thus all fields and positions should be open to women. Because the world of knowledge is the same for both sexes, “the objects of competition are one and the same for both men and women--instructorships and professors’ chairs, scholarly fame, and power to advance, however little, the outposts of knowledge.”¹¹

Throughout her life M. Carey Thomas remained committed to complete equality in educational and professional opportunity for men and women. In 1899, as she confronted Eliot, she feared that acknowledgment of any difference between men and women and any accommodation of that difference in curriculum could threaten women’s chances. She shared with her age--and with Eliot--a positivist belief in science. Truth existed and could be fathomed by human intelligence. She had been trained abroad in philology, the nineteenth-century science of language. She believed that an education based on experimental methods could find the true patterns underlying language, build

sound bridges, and cure typhoid fever. That education was to be open on equal terms to women and men. They were to learn the same methods, rules, and content in the same manner.

Through the conflicting perspectives of Eliot and Thomas one can see the way that the battle lines over gender were drawn at the turn of the century by America's most progressive educators. In 1899 to focus on women's distinctiveness was to question their right to the world's culture and knowledge. To assert that right required that one deny that gender existed in the realm of intellect and art.

It is interesting to think about Eliot's position in the light of more recent debates over women's studies. Although most of what Eliot said in 1899 is abhorrent because it limits women's intellectual and professional opportunities, we might wish to reconsider one statement: "It remains to demonstrate what are the most appropriate, pleasing, and profitable studies for women, both from the point of view of the individual and the point of view of society; and this demonstration must be entirely freed from the influence of comparisons with the intellectual capacities and tastes of men." It is possible to read these words as an invitation to reconsider women's difference in a positive way.

Thomas herself, I think, would have led this reconsideration. In 1913 in one of her chapel talks, she spoke to Bryn Mawr students about the new movement of feminism. It meant not the narrow pursuit of legal rights but women's broader effort to open opportunity and to inject a distinctive perspective. It was a worldwide movement of women and men that sees "the emergence into the life of the state, . . . into literature, into scholarship, medicine, philosophy, art, wherever the human spirit manifests itself, of the

woman's point of view." It was more than women getting the vote and attaining equal opportunity and pay; it was "the coming into our social, artistic, literary, civic life of the woman's point of view for the first time honestly expressed."¹²

In 1921 she gave an address of welcome for Madame Marie Curie at a gathering of university women in Carnegie Hall. She celebrated "the coming to its own of a new group-consciousness on the part of women. . . . a wholly new sex solidarity." At the end of the international struggle for education and the vote, women were seeking freedom "to act as we think best . . . the right to dispose of our own lives and bodies . . . to live worthily and unashamed."

Through suffrage work, Thomas had come to understand that women as a group had interests different from men. "These differences cannot be ignored. For the sake of us all, men and women alike, they must not be ignored. Our different woman's outlook must be written large into the laws and life of all civilized nations."¹³ Thomas here argues not only for a positive understanding of women's intellectual, aesthetic, and political differences, but also for an infusion of that difference into the world of public affairs.

As we think about the way that women stood at Harvard's gates and breached them over a century ago, we can return to the great debate between Eliot and Thomas, and then circle back, realizing that some words indeed matter a great deal.

Notes

1. I have considered Eliot's reforms at Harvard in *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987), 70-73; I have treated the founding of the Annex in *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 95-104.
2. Mary Whitall Thomas to M. Carey Thomas, June 10, 1874, in *The Papers of M. Carey Thomas in the Bryn Mawr College Archives*, ed. Lucy Fisher West, 217 reels (Woodbridge, Conn.: Research Publications, Inc., 1982), reel 61, frame 247.
3. Eliot's address at Smith was printed in the *Springfield Republican*, June 19, 1879, under the title "Elective Studies for Women."
4. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 97.
5. I have documented M. Carey Thomas' life in *The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994).
6. M. Carey Thomas, Report to the President and Trustees, Bryn Mawr College, June 7, 1884, p. 24, M. Carey "Thomas Professional Papers, Bryn Mawr Organization, Bryn Mawr College Archives, Bryn Mawr, Pa.; Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 115; Horowitz, *M. Carey Thomas*, 191-92.
7. For a full discussion of these developments, see Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 237-47.
8. *A Record of the Exercises Attending the Inauguration of Caroline Hazard, Litt. D., as President of Wellesley College, III October MDCCCXCIX* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1899), 14-19.

9. M. Carey Thomas to Mary E. Garrett, Oct. 3, 1899, Papers of M. Carey Thomas, reel 22, frame 540; M. Carey Thomas to Mary E. Garrett, Nov. 3, 1899, *ibid.*, reel 22, frame 640.
10. Address to Students at the Opening of the Academic Year 1899-1900, Oct. 10, 1899, typescript, *ibid.*, reel 182. This talk, published as "The Bryn Mawr Woman," in *The Educated Woman in America*, ed. Barbara Cross, Classics in Education no. 25 (New York: Teachers' College Press of Columbia University, 1965), 139-44, first introduced me to M. Carey Thomas.
11. M. Carey Thomas, "Should the Higher Education of Women Differ from That of Men?" *Educational Review* 21 (1901): 1-10.
12. M. Carey Thomas, Chapel Address, 1913, Bryn Mawr College Archives.
13. M. Carey Thomas, "The Woman's Programme," May 18, 1921, *Bryn Mawr Bulletin* (June 1921), 7-17.